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ANIMATING ANTIQUITY ON CHILDREN'S TELEVISION: THE VISUAL WORLDS OF *ULYSSES 31* AND *SAMURAI JACK*

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ABSTRACT: The **article** discusses two animated children's television-series: *Samurai Jack*, Episode 25 "Jack and the Spartans" (2002) and *Ulysses 31* (1980), for the ways in which each programme employed techniques from contemporary anime, animation and main-stream cinema to provide two distinct visual re-imaginings of classical antiquity for a child-audience. First the **article** examines how "Jack and the Spartans" played a significant, but under-appreciated role, in the development of Zack Snyder's film *300* (2006) and his visualisation of live-action Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. By comparison, *Ulysses 31* was a late 20th c. French-Japanese co-production that employed highly esteemed anime artists and French animators, drawing on the works of Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas (among others) to create the aesthetic of *Ulysses 31* which engaged in depth with stories about Odysseus and wider Greek mythology. From this, it is possible to observe how both television-series used techniques and material found in contemporary anime and cinema.

KEY-WORDS: *Ulysses 31*, *Samurai Jack*, Greek Mythology, Cinema, Animation.

¹ I work, research and teach in the Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Durham, UK. All suggestions and queries about this article are most welcome. Contact me on: sarah.miles@durham.ac.uk. For more on my research profile: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/classics/staff/?id=7615>. My research and publications span classical receptions of Greek mythology in contemporary culture as well as the study of ancient Greek drama, the fragments of comic drama, and specifically the inter-generic relationship between ancient Greek comedy and Greek tragedy.

The images, sounds and experiences of our childhood have a lasting impact on us. Some of this we even carry into adulthood. Children of the late 20th and early 21st centuries with access to televisions and cinemas (and now on-line streaming) have been constantly absorbing the images, sounds and experiences of film and television-programmes, both live-action and animated. For many individuals this has occurred throughout our lives, from childhood to adulthood. The audio-visual languages of film, television and animation are, therefore, ones that we have learnt how to read as children, and we have grown up with them into adulthood. Film, television and animation are familiar; they are a cultural constant. If we focus on *children's* television in particular during this time-period, we find that this form of media is alone in being defined and delimited by *its intended audience of children*. Therefore, children's media is a unique cultural artefact in the study of our socio-cultural engagement with the world around us.² Moreover, given its focus on children, some of this media actively seeks to educate and inspire as well as to entertain its child-audience.³ This specialist audience is provided with the means to engage with the world around them via the media of television, film and animation. A distinctive part of that world includes engagement with the past and specifically with classical antiquity, which continues to inhabit an influential position in our conceptualisation of cultural heritage in the West.⁴ Therefore, the unique workings of children's media and its relationship with classical antiquity each merit further exploration and hold a distinctive connection that requires a specialised approach.

In the following paper, I can only scratch the surface of this wider work, but my contribution very much fits into this broader context of how children's media provides a culturally rich and theoretically distinctive engagement with the world around us. It is an engagement that is

2 On children's television culture in the UK, see: Steemers (2013; 2016); Home (2011); D'Arma, A. & Steemers J. (2012) and generally the work in the UK *Journal of Children and Media*.

3 Important work has been done here by Messenger Davies over the past decades: Messenger Davies' book (1989): *Television is Good for Your Kids* remains central reading on this topic; see also Messenger Davies (2010).

4 The seminal works on classical reception: Hardwick (2003), Martindale & Thomas (2006) have acted as catalyst and encouragement for countless works, including numerous related to popular culture: e.g. Nisbet (2008); Lowe & Shahabudin (2009); Michelakis & Wyke (2013), McConnell & Hall (2016); Pomeroy (2017).

influential in how we grow into (so-called) adults,⁵ and one that we revisit as adults, and may even choose to re-explore with our own children. Children's media plays an influential role in how we grow and develop as individuals both in childhood, adulthood and (for some) in parenthood. What is striking is the degree to which depictions of classical antiquity have a stake in this development. At the same time the conflicting (and at times contradictory) attitudes which adults hold towards children, who are always a future generation of adults, are seen to be encapsulated in the treatment of classical antiquity through the contemporary media and art-forms of their day.⁶

Working from this basis, I shall use the following two questions as my starting point:

1. What images of classical antiquity do adults choose to communicate to children via the medium of animated television?
2. How do the adult creators of children's animated television use the distinctive features of their contemporary media to communicate these images of classical antiquity to its child-audience?

In addition, when we come to consider how we represent classical antiquity to children, it is necessary to examine how contemporary media are adapted specifically to cater for a *child-audience*, while also appealing to *adult* parents, who are an influential factor in a child's access to media.⁷ The image of classical antiquity that we bestow on our children is one that we as adults purposefully shape amid various conflicting factors that I present in the following form:

⁵ For recent work in relation to children's literature: Zipes (2012); Handy (2017).

⁶ Cf. Murnaghan (2011, 340): "children's versions of the classics can help us to think about popular versions of the classics more generally, about why they exist and what they accomplish." Research into this area is expanding, e.g. Marciniak (2016); Lovatt & Hodkinson (2018).

⁷ Peter Hunt, a key figure in the study of children's literature, defines children's literature as follows: "As a group it is at once one of the liveliest and most original of the arts, and the site of the crudest commercial exploitation." Hunt (2005: 1). Elsewhere Hunt acknowledges that most children's books and children's book studies are about the relationship between adults and children Hunt (2011: 36). On children's television specifically: Steemers (2010); Messenger Davies (2010). These scholars have been influential in my approach to children's televisual animation of classical antiquity.

- (1.) the power of *commercial marketing* of children's media to children and parents;
- (2.) the claims of *educational intentions* of some of that media;
- (3.) the concerns to create a *fictional space deemed 'safe' or 'suitable'* by adults;
- (4.) the desires to create a space that is *appealing to children, a space filled with adventure, creativity and imagination*.⁸

The inter-dependence of these four factors varies in the case of each item of children's media, but it is the combination of these factors that will inform my reading of children's media and its engagement with classical antiquity.

Indeed, it is within this distinctive cultural frame that I see the relationship between children's media and classical antiquity functioning. But, in this **article** I shall limit myself to examining only the visual depictions of ancient Greek mythology and the Greek historical past in children's animated television of the late 20th and early 21st centuries using examples from the two animated children's television series: *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004), Episode 25: "Jack and the Spartans" and *Ulysses 31* (1980). I have written elsewhere more extensively on *Ulysses 31* and its engagement with Homeric epic in a chapter which emphasises that the creative freedom of the artists is notably matched by the educational quality of its engagement with classical sources.⁹ But, in this present article, using the four factors raised above, I argue that each of these animated television-programmes, "Jack and the Spartans" from *Samurai Jack* and *Ulysses 31* provides a visual re-imagining of antiquity that is mediated through a distinctive engagement with the contemporary popular culture of cinema and anime as it evolved in the late 20th and 21st centuries. This engagement reflects the developments in children's animated television, aimed at an international market between the 1980s and 2000s. It is an area of study in children's media and classical

⁸ I should add that these four factors need not be assumed to be a conscious choice of the creators and consumers of children's media, but rather **they can an** indirect but overt expression of how children's media functions in our society.

⁹ Miles (2018); see also Bainbridge (2010).

reception that is largely ignored, and it certainly merits further attention.¹⁰ I have chosen these two programmes, *Samurai Jack* and *Ulysses 31*, because both were internationally popular, enjoyed commercial success, and each involved the mass marketization and merchandising. But also, the two programmes employed techniques from contemporary Japanese anime and main-stream Western cinema to express a *grandeur* and *scale* in their (re-) presentation of the ancient world that emulates the prestige which is often ascribed to classical antiquity. In addition, these two television programmes made the ancient world *accessible* and *appealing* to new, international, child audiences. This was achieved by engaging with contemporary art-forms of cinema, animated-television and anime.

Using these two television programmes we will see where the cinematic/anime frame is key in how these very different animations each re-formed and re-imagined the ancient world for child audiences. Cinema and anime were not only contemporary cultural languages which children (and adults) knew how to read, but they were also popular, which allowed for the commercial marketing of classical antiquity to a new audience.

The influential role of anime in this mix is evident from the style of animation used by each children's series, which draws on techniques from live-action cinema. It is precisely this technique which the great anime director Tezuka Osamu pioneered when he moved away from old fashioned comic-drawing: "This made it possible to create dramatic or psychological effects so I began to use cinematic techniques".¹¹ These cinematic techniques of anime are something at work in both "Jack and the Spartans" and *Ulysses 31*. Television plays a powerful role in shaping children's earliest perceptions and receptions of Graeco-Roman antiquity, and these two television-animations, *Samurai Jack* and *Ulysses 31* used contemporary cinema and anime to do so. The familiar and the popular are here used to relay something unfamiliar and (traditionally) elitist, and that something is a visual, animate version of Greek mythology and the Greek historical past.

¹⁰ For work on anime, animation and classical antiquity see: Lindner (2008; 2017); Castello & Scilabra (2015); for seminal work on the study of animation see: Wells (1998; 2007).

¹¹ Schodt (1983: 63).

I. *Samurai Jack*

Samurai Jack first aired on Cartoon Network between 2001-2004. It was created by the American Genndy Tartakovsky, a highly successful producer of animation, whose work include *Dexter's Laboratory*, *The PowerPuff Girls*, *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, and a new series of *Samurai Jack* even aired in 2017.¹² The *Samurai Jack* of 2001-2004 was a children's action-animation about a time-travelling Samurai, who seeks to return to the past to defeat the evil shape-shifter Aku. The series *Samurai Jack* ran for four seasons, fifty-two episodes in total, each twenty minutes in length, over a period of four years. This is further testament to its commercial and popular success. As is the fact that the series won four Emmy awards, including a Primetime Emmy Award (2003) for "Jack and the Spartans" (which first aired 4th October 2002). This award was for "Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation", awarded to Dan Krall (layout artist), which marks industry-wide recognition for the makers of *Samurai Jack*, and specifically for the visual aesthetic of the episode. "Jack and the Spartans" sees our hero, Samurai Jack, meet with 300 Spartan warriors and join them in a battle against robot opponents to guard the pass of Thermopylae. Together Samurai and Spartan defeat the robots and thereby liberate the Greeks. Therefore, in this fictional version, this becomes the '300 + 1' Spartans, which is directly referenced in the episode. The plot and visuals are ultimately inspired by the story of the 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) as told in Lynn Varley and Frank Miller's graphic novel *300*.¹³ The ancient account was recorded originally by the 5th c. BCE sources, e.g. the Greek historian Herodotus, but it has been constantly retold and it remains a regular in popular culture.¹⁴

¹² Tartakovsky recently directed the *Hotel Transylvania* movies (2012-2018). These were his directorial debut. The new updated *Samurai Jack* series was released in 2017, aired on Adult Swim's Toonami with a less humorous feel than the original and more adult content to cater for the age differential of its intended audience, who are now a decade older from the first series in the early 2000s. This is in itself evidence of the enduring appeal and loyal fan-base that developed from the original cartoon.

¹³ Originally released in five issues between May and September 1998.

¹⁴ On the visual aesthetic of Snyder's *300* in relation to classical antiquity see Turner (2009) and on the depiction of the Spartans see Fotheringham (2012); on the political ideology of *300* see Winkler (2017).

My interest in this present article is in the ways that the visual aesthetic of the episode “Jack and the Spartans” is heavily reliant on Varley-Miller’s graphic novel *300* in its visual conceptualisation of the Spartans, and how this has gone on to be widely influential in our depiction of live-action Spartans. This is because “Jack and the Spartans” employs a purposefully cinematic style of animation, which we just noted was a hallmark of anime, and thereby it was speaking in the language understood by the widest possible audience. But most remarkably, “Jack and the Spartans” aired four years before Zack Snyder’s Hollywood film *300* (2006). Snyder’s film was an adaptation of Miller-Varley’s *300*, but, as we shall see, “Jack and the Spartans” was an additional and influential factor in Snyder’s live-action rendering of the Spartans. I shall provide some “visual quotations” to illustrate how the makers of *Samurai Jack* engaged closely with Miller-Varley’s *300*, using this as a launch-pad for their own cinematic depiction of the Spartans of Thermopylae, which was influential on Snyder’s later cinematic version of *300*. This in turn has cemented an adapted, live-action form of the Varley-Miller *300* in contemporary culture. The children’s animation, *Samurai Jack* played a key role in this visual realisation of the Spartans, which has been hitherto under-appreciated.

The Hollywood film *300* went on to reach an even wider international audience-base. Miller’s influence runs deep for the entire concept of *Samurai Jack* since one of Miller’s early comic book series *Ronin* involves a Samurai who finds himself in the future after a curse from the evil spirit Agat.¹⁵ This is the premise upon which *Samurai Jack* is built, but here the evil demon is called Aku. This gives a sense of how closely engaged *Samurai Jack* was with contemporary culture, and that its relationship with classical antiquity is inextricably bound up in its contemporary cultural aesthetic.

Therefore, before we go any further, it is important to contextualise the vibrant and culturally rich contents of *Samurai Jack* in order to appreciate what is distinctive about “Jack and the Spartans” and its imagining of classical antiquity. This will also provide an important parallel with the

15 Issue 1: July 1983; Issue 2: September 1983; Issue 3: November 1983; Issue 4: January 1984; Issue 5: May 1984; Issue 6: August 1984.

equally inventive and culturally diverse *Ulysses 31*. The whole series of *Samurai Jack* was aimed at children and young adults, but its appeal has been much wider because it combines a unique style of animation that employs techniques used in anime and cinema, and it contains lots of humour and endless popular culture references. To give you a sense of the style of *Samurai Jack* here are some visual and audial examples of the many popular culture references: in the opening credits to each 52 episodes there is a visual nod to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as Jack falls forward through time;¹⁶ in the same opening credits we start by hearing the voice of Mako (Makoto Iwamatsu), famous to a generation for his role in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger.¹⁷ As this opening monologue makes clear, Mako is voicing the arch-villain Aku. Other references include citations from the highly popular Japanese *Lone Wolf and Cub*,¹⁸ *Star Wars*, computer games such as *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Combat*, Westerns (e.g. Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*), the cinema of Akira Kurosawa, including *Yojimbo*, but also *Monty Python*, *Enter The Dragon*, *Highlander*, *The Matrix*, *Star Trek*. References can even be specific verbal-visual cues, e.g. to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (Aku: "Here's Jackie"), or cultural cues such as children's fairy-tales like little red riding hood. Clearly, *Samurai Jack* is a culturally rich and diverse children's animation. And it is with an understanding that this is what defines *Samurai Jack*'s aesthetic that we find the makers of *Samurai Jack* choosing to devote an entire episode to adapting Miller-Varley's graphic novel 300. Furthermore, this is done in an overtly cinematic manner that marks it out as visually and audibly distinctive from these other episodes of *Samurai Jack*.

The plot for "Jack and the Spartans" is quite simple: the 300 Spartans are involved in an endless war fighting to defend their homes against

16 For an episode guide to *Samurai Jack*, see: <http://samuraijack.cardinalperception.com/> and: http://samuraijack.wikia.com/wiki/Episode_Guide (04/04/2018)

17 In the sequel, *Conan The Destroyer* (1984), Mako played the evil wizard Akiru, whose name is reminiscent of the villain of *Samurai Jack*: Aku. This gives an idea of the many-layered engagements with contemporary culture which *Samurai Jack* contains even before we turn to Miller-Varley's 300.

18 This originated as a manga, but has also appeared as a television series and numerous films.

robot-bulls.¹⁹ Our hero, Samurai Jack finds a narrow ravine, he helps the Spartan leader King Spartok (who represents the ancient Spartan King Leonidas) to defeat the army of robots, and so the Spartans gain their freedom, while wrongly believing that Samurai Jack gave his life in order to save them. This story-pattern evokes the original Battle of Thermopylae in which all 300 Spartans gave their lives to guard the mountain pass from the advancing Persian army. In *Samurai Jack* the Persian “Other” is turned into an emotionless robot, whereas in Snyder’s *300* the Persians become monstrous and grotesque. Therefore, in both *Samurai Jack* and *300* the Persians are rendered inhuman and inhumane. In *Samurai Jack* we have a wonderful image of Samurai and Spartan working together, which allows for a comparison of popular perceptions of the workings of ancient Spartan vs. Bushido warrior codes. Great care is given to the martial presentation of ancient Greek and Japanese hero alike, but both are presented as admirable, honourable and determined, and therefore as suitable role-models for children. Indeed, in the cartoon no blood is shed because only robot-bulls are slashed to pieces; the enemy are dehumanised to the extent that they do not bleed. And yet there is a heady mix of violence and valour in this episode.²⁰

Visually the majority of the episode is displayed in “letterbox” wide-screen, and the colour palette is dominated with the power of red, the dominant colour of Miller-Varley’s *300*. There are a numerous visual parallels between Miller/Varley’s *300* and *Samurai Jack*, and these include, the presentation of the pass, which is key to the battle, for example: the depiction of Spartans telling stories round the camp-fire; the use of “helm-vision” in battle scenes, the choice of shot and angle to depict the Spartans *en masse*, the moody lighting, colouring with large scale armies depicted throughout that evokes Miller-Varley’s *300*. All of this is matched by

19 Their hybrid form is perhaps reminiscent of the Minotaur, given the classical Greek aesthetic to the episode, but also they evoke Spanish bulls before a matador since they are frequently depicted alongside the Spartans with their long flowing red cloaks, which are a characteristic feature of Miller-Varley’s Spartans.

20 The creators of *Samurai Jack* have admitted that the use of robot opponents with hanging out cables and flashes of electricity allowed them to depict much greater levels of violence to children than they would have been able to get away with had the enemies been human (‘Genndy’s Scrapbook’ on the *Samurai Jack* Season 2 DVD, Disk 2).

sombre music, which changes its mood in line with the action in a way reminiscent of cinema, using techniques which recall Tezuka Osamu's words quoted earlier. For those who have seen other episodes of *Samurai Jack* with its lively music and colour, it is clear that "Jack and the Spartans" is aiming to create its own darker and more serious atmosphere in animating classical antiquity via Miller-Varley's *300*.

The most surprising aspect is the extent to which Zack Snyder's film *300* (2006) owes a direct debt to this twenty-minute *Samurai Jack* episode. Grant Freckelton, the visual effects art director on Snyder's film *300*, has stated that after experimenting with stills for the film, and which the studio approved, he began adapting Miller-Varley's *300* into moving sequences, and he sent Snyder copies of *Samurai Jack*.²¹ Therefore, the cinematic qualities of *Samurai Jack* produce an episode that itself went on to influence the cinematic representation of *300*. What is most notable is that the makers of the animated television-series *Samurai Jack* used the language of anime and cinema, inspired by Miller-Varley's *300* to present their version of the 300 Spartans to their young audiences.

This brief exploration of the visual depiction of classical antiquity in "Jack and the Spartans" highlights what is an under-appreciated aspect of this children's animation: *Samurai Jack* has played an influential role in shaping the popular culture perception of the Spartans on film such as we see in *300*. The visuals and complementary audio soundtrack of "Jack and the Spartans" created a cinematic aesthetic which worked so well for communicating the grandeur and power of this Greek story that it was redeployed and developed in the adult live-action film *300* by Zack Snyder. However, it is the animation of Genndy Tartakovsky that first presented the world with live-action Spartans drawing from Miller-Varley's *300* via the medium of 2-D animation. And these Spartans were animate, action-packed, cinematic renderings. The role of Tartakovsky and his team in re-imagining the Spartans in visual-action form deserves credit for the part it played in shaping the Spartans in our popular imagination as sombre, serious and impressive figures, but ones which reveal conflicting models

21 http://features.cgsociety.org/story_custom.php?story_id=3979 (24/11/2017 via www.waybackmachine.org)

of masculine-only heroes. Since, in order to preserve their way of life these heroes fight to the death, and in the film *300* they fight even to the death of their own humanity.

II. *Ulysses 31*

This children's animation first aired in France in 1980; it was a Japanese-French production which had worldwide success, and was dubbed into many languages.²² The makers of *Ulysses 31* went on to even greater fame with the *Mysterious Cities of Gold* and many other French-Japanese collaborations, but *Ulysses 31* was the first such collaboration.²³ *Ulysses 31* sets the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus in 31st century space. This animated television-series, like "Jack and the Spartans", engaged directly with contemporary developments in anime and cinema. And in the case of *Ulysses 31* it was drawing on the mid-to-late 20th century. We will look at the most prominent cinematic influences which were George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). As with *Samurai Jack*, we will focus on the visual aspects that *Ulysses 31* takes from cinema and television, but we will also see that the creators of *Ulysses 31* chose to foreground a Western visual aesthetic over Japanese anime style as a way of preserving a visual "Western" feel to the image of ancient Greek myth that we find throughout *Ulysses 31*, and which is more plain to see in the way the creators chose to depict the gods.

The twenty-six-part series *Ulysses 31* combined the latest talent in Japanese anime with French animators.²⁴ *Ulysses 31* was a space-age adventure, set in the 31st century that was based closely on the journey

22 It was dubbed in order to be broadcast in: Japan Spain, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Greece, Portugal, Australia, Canada and the USA as well as the UK.

23 *Rainbow Brite*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Inspector Gadget*, *Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors*, *The Care Bears*, *Heathcliff*, *The Popples*.

24 Jean Chalopin, Nina Wolmark and Bernard Deyriès were the French writing-producing team; the Japanese artists involved is remarkable: the famous character designer Araki Shingo (his work includes *Saint Seiya*), the mecha designer Shôji Kawamori (e.g. he was involved in the creation of the Transformer Optimus Prime), and the renowned anime director Nagahama Tadao, who sadly died before *Ulysses 31* was finished.

of the Greek hero Odysseus back home from Troy to his wife and son, Penelope and Telemachus.²⁵ This account is most famously told in Homer's ancient epic poem *The Odyssey*, but there are countless variants that exist from ancient through to modern times, from around the world.²⁶ *Ulysses 31* is remarkable for the detailed way that it engages with the myths surrounding Odysseus but also for engaging with a wide range of Greek mythology, as is evident from the episode titles and subject-matter alone.²⁷ *Ulysses 31* told of Ulysses' wanderings through space and his efforts to return home to earth and to his wife Penelope while battling against the gods who wish to prevent his return after he blinded the biomechanical cyclops. In this version, Ulysses goes through numerous adventures in the company of his son Telemachus, who provides a focus for the child-audience. Therefore, *Ulysses 31* reimagines the key father-son dynamic at work in Homer's *Odyssey*. In *Ulysses 31* they are accompanied by Yumi from the planet Zotra and the comical robot Nono. Their spaceship is notably called 'the Odyssey', and so our crew spend the series travelling in the company of the *Odyssey*, whose name is repeatedly mentioned. In *Ulysses 31* the crew receive help from the on-board computer, Shyrka, which is a Japanese pronunciation of Circe. The Homeric Circe was the witch with supernatural powers who advised Odysseus on how to reach home, and in *Ulysses 31* these supernatural powers are translated into the superhuman powers of a navigation computer, whose presentation and aesthetic evokes that of HAL 9000 from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. These are just some of the many subtle reworkings of the Homeric *Odyssey* that we find in *Ulysses 31*, and it has already brought us to speak about contemporary cinematic influence of Kubrick.

25 "Ulysses" is the Latin and "Ulysse" the French equivalent names for the ancient Greek hero "Odysseus".

26 The printed history of Homeric epic alone fills a volume of nearly five hundred pages: see Young (2003); for a brief survey of the cultural influence of Homer's *Odyssey* see Hall (2008).

27 Miles (2018: 156) contains a full list of the English and French episode titles. These episodes involve stories from Odysseus' adventures: The Cyclops, the Laestrygonians (who are not cannibals, however), Calypso, Scylla and Charybdis, Aeolus King of the Winds, Circe, the Sirens, the lotus-eaters, the contest against the suitors, the journey to Hades. Further characters from Greek myth appear including: Medusa, the Minotaur with Theseus and Ariadne, Orpheus and Eurydice, Atlas, Sisyphus, the Sphinx, Chronus, the three Fates. Miles (2018: 156) contains a full list of the English and French episode titles.

Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* inspires the visual conceptualisation of the animation set in space and particularly the design of Ulysses' ship, the *Odyssey*. In Episode 12 of *Ulysses 31* the characters even find an abandoned ship from Earth with an astronaut in suspended animation who is said to be from 2001 specifically, and the ship contains an on-board computer that is modelled directly on HAL9000.²⁸ By comparison, George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) inspired many aspects of the action and sound of *Ulysses 31*. This includes the orchestration of space-battle scenes, the light-sabre inspired sword of Ulysses, the use of thematic music and the style of sound-effects which recall those of the *Star Wars* universe. There are light-sabre sounds for Ulysses' weapon and noises reminiscent of R2D2, X-wings and TIE fighters (and even a snippet of music from *Empire Strike Back*, which risked a legal dispute).

Contemporary sci-fi/fantasy cinema provides recurrent tropes to draw a child audience into this epic world of Ulysses. This is most plain to see in Episode 24, "Strange Meeting" where Ulysses of the 31st c. meets his ancient Greek forebear, Ulysses 1, which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere.²⁹ The literary model of Greek epic was here re-imagined in terms of the audio-visual languages of contemporary science-fiction films. And it is into this re-imagining that *Ulysses 31* chooses to bring the Greek gods, but despite the medium of animation being one defined by movement, the creators of *Ulysses 31* chose to depict their gods without movement, drawing on the iconography of ancient Greek sculpture, depicting the gods as grey and notably inanimate except for the eyes. This means that the gods of *Ulysses 31* maintain a visually familiar, and classical feel, which provides a constant reference back to the classical heritage from which *Ulysses 31* springs. This is all the more noteworthy because the creators of *Ulysses 31* originally animated the pilot-episode for the series using anime-style characters. But following the pilot-episode, the creators chose to hark back to a more traditional, Western model for the appearance of all the characters, and this is most notably evident in the

²⁸ We even see Ulysses' reflection in the computer's round glass window, just as we see human reflections in the glass of HAL9000.

²⁹ Miles (2018: 152-3).

depiction of the mighty Olympians as cold, inanimate Greek sculptures. The freedom of animation for visualising fictional space (past or future) is shaped throughout *Ulysses 31* by the ways it chooses to bring the stories of Odysseus to life. This is achieved by drawing on a wide range of cinematic sources and innovative animation techniques combined with wider knowledge of Greek myth and Greek epic.

III. Conclusion

Samurai Jack and *Ulysses 31* indicate how cinema and anime offer a point of mediation for translating the visual power, scale and grandeur of classical antiquity using two internationally-recognised forms of 20th-21st c. popular culture: cinematic film and anime. These contemporary media made the stories and myths of the ancient Greek world accessible and appealing to young audiences who were already versed in the art-forms of cinema, television animation and anime. Moreover, the creators of *Ulysses 31* and “Jack and the Spartans” each showed an attention to detail in how they engaged with classical antiquity, making the connections to our ancient classical sources overt and specific. This is done in a way that is characteristic of a certain type of children’s media, which relates to the educational and formative role that some adults wish to place, and some parents wish to find, in children’s media.

We have seen that animation as a mode of classical reception presents us with different questions for study of the ancient and modern world compared to other visual media. The concern of an animator is on the combination of visualisation, music, voice and movement as a way of relaying plot and character in a highly condensed time-frame. In *Samurai Jack* Tartakovsky chooses to use the Spartans as characters and to re-imagine them for his own purposes within the wider narrative of his series. To this end he animates the Spartans from Miller-Varley’s *300*, giving them voices, movement and a musical soundtrack, all within the limits of a twenty-minute episode. By contrast, *Ulysses 31* focused on the adventure and voyage of discovery through popular Greek mythology drawing on the cinematic mainstream of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001 A Space: Odyssey*

alongside George Lucas' *Star Wars* in a unique combination that only the medium of animation could visualise and bring to life. Each episode was also around twenty minutes, and so again we see that animation produces a very condensed, rich interaction with classical antiquity. The futuristic space-setting of *Ulysses 31* also conveyed the grandeur and scale of the ancient world, but at the same time it used popular imagery and iconography with which children and their parents would be familiar and which would appeal to a wide range of international audiences. This was important because both animated television-series were made for export to a global audience.

In the case of *Samurai Jack*, we saw how the episode "Jack and the Spartans" (2002) was a key visual influence for Zack Snyder's live-action film *300* (2006), which was in turn based on Miller-Varley's *300* (1998). By juxtaposing a time-travelling samurai with ancient Spartan warriors, the episode could also explore the concept of heroism through another unique combination of images of a Spartan warrior code and the Bushido code of the samurai warrior in order to draw connections across cultures and between ancient and modern worlds. However, this also reveals conflicting narratives relating to masculinity, heroism, and humanism. By comparison, the visual aesthetic of *Ulysses 31* was notably Western-leaning, despite being a French-Japanese co-production, as seen in the depiction of the Greek gods, who are visualised as motionless statues, all the more menacing for their fixed expressions.

The visions of classical antiquity that we find in these two televisual animations are distinctive and individual, but both used the mass appeal of mainstream cinema, the narrative power and pull of anime and animation, and the creative space of children's animation that actually animated the ancient world for child-audiences. This newly created imaginative space serves as a source of inspiration and intrigue for future generations who continue to be taught that classical antiquity should have a space within Western cultural heritage. *Samurai Jack* and *Ulysses 31* show us how freely adaptable those spaces continue to be.

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